

Then we went to the Medicare bill. It was \$400 billion. Two months later, it was \$550 billion. And today, and it is funny, if it was not so sad, it would be hilarious, \$1.2 trillion. We went from \$400 billion when we voted on this thing, to \$1.2 trillion. So this is clearly a pattern. So when they come to us with this proposal, how are we supposed to believe them? How are the young people supposed to believe them?

Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ. So is their theory, if they say it enough times, it will become true?

Mr. RYAN of Ohio. I think that is it. Basically we are going to bet the ponies, and we do not have any money in our pocket, so we are going to put it on our credit card at 21 percent. We have to pay the Chinese back because they issued us the credit card. It is a dangerous game.

Mr. SCOTT of Georgia. Mr. Speaker, I think it is very important that we reflect and understand the purpose of Social Security. This is an insurance program. We have investment programs for the stock market. We have 401(k)s in which an employer and an employee contributes. We have other kinds of alternatives. But, remember, it was the Democratic Party that birthed Social Security. It has been the Democratic Party that has protected Social Security. Social Security has been the bulwark of making America have the highest standard of living.

Let us not forget the words of the gentleman who produced Social Security, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who said we want to make sure that at no time in America will any of our people, as they get old, succumb to the throes and the woes of poverty.

□ 2045

It is an insurance program, plain and simple. If they want private accounts, there is nothing wrong with investing in the stock market. There are opportunities to do that. They have 401(k)s. But Social Security is there.

And I just say we are addressing most of our remarks to 20-somethings and 30-somethings, but our 20-somethings and 30-somethings will soon be 40-somethings and 50-somethings and 60-somethings. At the end of the day, we need to make sure that we do not disturb that cushion that has provided America with the highest standard of living in the world, and that cushion is Social Security.

Mr. MEEK of Florida. Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. SCOTT) could not say it better.

And just in closing, Mr. Speaker, as we close, we want to make sure that we want people to go on to find out more about not only what House Democrats are talking about, but as it relates to our tour throughout the country. It is democraticleader.house.gov/30something. Also, we would close with the message that Democrats want to strengthen Social Security without slashing benefits to Americans that

they have earned. Private accounts make the Social Security challenge worse, enforce massive benefit cuts, and increase the national debt. Once President Bush stops insisting on private accounts, then we can have a true debate as it relates to making sure the promise of Social Security will be around for future generations to come.

It is always a pleasure to co-chair this hour with the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. RYAN). And also I want to thank the gentlewoman from Florida (Ms. WASSERMAN SCHULTZ) for being a part of the working group 30-something. And to the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. SCOTT), it is always good to have a 40-something. I will go ahead and put it that way.

AMERICA'S VETERANS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. BOUSTANY). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 4, 2005, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. STRICKLAND) is recognized for 60 minutes.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks on the subject of my Special Order.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Ohio?

There was no objection.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I am here with the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS), my good friend and colleague, the ranking member on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs tonight; and we will be joined by some others a little later. But we are here to talk about some of the issues facing America's veterans and especially the result of the budget on veterans health care.

I would like to preface my remarks, though, by saying that in this Chamber comprised of 435 Members from all across this country, Democrats and Republicans, some people from large cities, others from small towns, we all have to make decisions in this Chamber. We make decisions about what is most important for our constituents and what is most important for the American people. So we have to choose among priorities. But it is my feeling as a Member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, and I am sure the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) feels the same way, that America's veterans should be given a high priority by this Congress.

Right now we have Americans, most of them young, but many of them in their 30s and 40s and even some in their 50s fighting for us in Iraq and in Afghanistan, and there are soldiers scattered in other places around this Earth. They are putting their lives on the line for us, and many have in the past put their lives on the line. They have lost their lives, many have, and others have lost their health, lost their

limbs, lost their peace of mind as a result of their service to this country. So I believe that most Americans feel as if this country has an obligation, a sacred obligation, a moral obligation to do what is right for our veterans.

We are making choices here in Washington, D.C., and some of the choices we are making are choices between providing tax breaks to the richest people in this country, while at the same time we are making decisions to cut back, to reduce, to limit the health care that is available to America's veterans. This is certainly reflected in the President's budget.

But before I talk about the budget, I yield to the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS), the good ranking member of our committee. The gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) is a strong advocate for veterans, and I want yield to him to say a few words before I get into some of the specifics regarding the President's budget and veterans health care.

Mr. EVANS. Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the gentleman's yielding to me, and I thank him for holding this Special Order.

I was 17 years old when I went into the United States Marine Corps. It was the proudest thing I have done in my life, including having this job, because it was really an experience in which we gave it all. I did not go to Vietnam, but I served as a Marine Corps guard of Naval Nuclear Ordnance in Okinawa. And it was a great point in my life. I was 18 years old when I got sent overseas, and I will never forget what those guys coming back home told us one night in a bar, going home from Vietnam via Okinawa, that the contributions they made, despite the controversy of that war, were ones that we should never have forgotten.

But not only did we forget Vietnam; we have forgotten the veterans of this new war that is going on. And I think it is tragic that we do not live up to the consequences of funding the programs that our veterans assume will be available to them, and I think that we have got to keep it in mind that the young people, minorities, poor white people are the same people who fought this war as was waged by those men and women in combat in the last war. That is why we need to do all we can to help the veterans out.

But this is not what the budget calls for. The budget call for increases in premiums paid for the prescription drug benefit, a benefit that has been very helpful to our veterans, particularly in line with the rate of increases in the private sector. The hospitalization is a big benefit to them, and yet this administration would sink to cut those benefits by double the pay for those benefits. So we have got a lot to work to do.

What do we tell the people back home in places like Quincy, Illinois, who have a State nursing home run by the State, but pay partial per diem each day? What are we going to do with

these people who have no place else to go and join the ranks of the unemployed? What are we going to tell those people who need that prescription drug benefit that it is doubling its cost to them? When are we going to talk about the educational benefits that rarely get talked about here? And it is a sad story because our veterans need help in that way too.

People that went into the Armed Forces did so out of the highest patriotic obligation, and they wanted to do it. That may sound ridiculous in light of what happens to so many veterans that they would be so strong and proud all these years that they still remain patriots today. As a Congressman, I do not know what I am going to tell people when I go back home. I am going to go back home and meet these people who are affected by this every day. Every day people living in cars, living in abandoned parts of the cities. We can do much better than this, it seems to me. And that is why I applaud the gentleman for yielding to me. I look forward to working with him in the committee. He has been a really good member, and I appreciate his time and his interest on this issue.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, I thank the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS), our ranking member on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs, not only for serving on the committee but for his service to this country and for his continuing service as a veteran.

I think it is time for some straight talk about what is being done for veterans. There may be some veterans listening tonight. I hope there are. There may be some family members of veterans listening or probably just Americans who may not know any veterans, but who are concerned that this Nation do the right thing.

I think a pattern is developing in this country, certainly within this Congress. I first noticed it at least a couple of years ago when the Veterans Administration put out a gag order. It was a change in policy that went out to all of the health care providers at VA hospitals and facilities across this country, and it was a dramatic change in policy. And this gag order instructed the doctors and nurses and social workers who work at our VA facilities to stop proactively disseminating information to veterans regarding the services they were legally entitled to receive under the laws that had been passed by this Congress.

For example, they were told they could not participate in community health fairs. They were told they could not make public service announcements urging veterans to take advantage of their legal benefits. That troubled me. But matters have gotten worse. Then the VA made the decision that they were going to create a brand-new category of veterans, call them Priority 8's. And they said these veterans are sick, they have illnesses, they need medical attention; but their

conditions are not directly related to their military service, and they are high income.

Some of these veterans could make as little as \$22,000 a year, and they were called high income. So the VA said these people cannot receive VA health care services now. There are just too many people coming in for service. We do not have enough money to provide that service; so we will ration VA health care service.

I thought that was reprehensible, quite frankly. I still do. But see what is happening in this budget. At a time when we are at war, right now as we stand here in the safety of the people's Chamber, the House of Representatives, at this very moment there are soldiers in Afghanistan and in Iraq risking their lives. We have lost over 1,440 soldiers. We have had thousands and thousands injured. We have got soldiers coming back nearly every day to the United States with these terrible injuries; and the President of the United States, the Commander in Chief, the man who made the decision to send these troops into war, has sent us a budget; and in his budget he woefully underfunds VA health care. It does not make sense.

Some people may be listening and may be thinking, That Ted Strickland is a Democrat; so he is just leading this partisan attack on the President or on the Republicans because he is a Democrat.

I want to share some press releases that have been issued within the last couple of days, not from me but from our veteran service organizations. For example, I have a press release that was issued by the Disabled American Veterans. The DAV, the Disabled American Veterans, is an organization that has 1.2 million members. It was founded in 1920, and it is a chartered organization, chartered by the United States Congress, and it represents our Nation's wartime disabled veterans. And they issued a news release describing the President's VA budget proposals. The heading is the "President's Budget Bad News for Sick and Disabled Veterans." I would just like to share some of the comments that the DAV has shared in their press release:

"The administration has proposed one of the most tight-fisted miserly budgets for veterans programs in recent memory, said the 1.2 million member Disabled American Veterans. It is making health care more expensive, and it is making health care less accessible to millions of America's defenders . . . 'As a result' of this budget, 'VA facilities across the country will cut staff and they will limit services even as the number of veterans seeking care is on the rise.'"

This is not me talking. This is the Disabled American Veterans talking.

□ 2100

It says, "The DAV and other major veterans organizations are united in calling on Congress to provide \$31.2 bil-

lion for veterans' medical care, which would be \$3.4 billion more than the President has requested. We are also united," the press release says, "in opposing new fees and higher copayments on certain veterans, because the administration wants to impose a new \$250 annual user fee on certain veterans, and veterans under this President's budget will see their prescription drug copayments more than double, going from \$7 to \$15 a prescription. There will be belt tightening at VA hospitals."

Then the press release concludes this way: "This budget proposal is bad news for the Nation's veterans, made even more distressing in the light of war in Iraq and military operations in Afghanistan and elsewhere."

That is what the disabled American Veterans have to say about President Bush's budget.

I see my good friend, the gentlewoman from the great State of Florida (Ms. CORRINE BROWN), a member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs. I yield to the gentlewoman.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I want to first of all thank the gentleman and the ranking member, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) for holding this special order.

Mr. Speaker, I want to ask the gentleman a question. I know I will get an opportunity to speak. But I was reading an article concerning the Under Secretary of Defense David Chu, and he said that the organizations that the gentleman was pointing to, the VA organizations, have been too successful in lobbying Congress and that we are taking money that should go to the military for weapons and we are giving it to the veterans.

Can the gentleman expound on that for me?

Mr. STRICKLAND. Well, reclaiming my time, Under Secretary Chu should be reprimanded by the President.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. Fired, excuse me.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Fired would be okay with me as well. This man, who is the part of the Pentagon, really said that money going to America's veterans was interfering with our ability to defend our country.

Well, it is almost laughable. If it was not something that had been said by a very high person within the administration, we would just ignore it and discount it.

I can tell you this: The National Commander of the American Legion has written a letter strongly objecting to what Mr. Chu has said. But this is just an example of the kind of disregard we find within this administration when it comes to veterans. There is an attack upon America's veterans within this administration. I do not know if it is coming from the President, but the President is the Commander-in-Chief, and he is the one who has the responsibility to stop it. He needs to stop it.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. If the gentleman would yield further, let me just read the statement. "Aggressive lobbying by veterans groups that brought about medical care for retired military health brings about this great drain on fighting wars, Chu said in the article. He described it as painful to move moneys for new weapons programs to accounts that fund TRICARE."

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, people can listen to his words and make their own judgments about what he has said. I, quite frankly, think it is shameful.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. If the gentleman would yield further, my question to the gentleman is I agree that we have a budget, and you determine something about the people of a country how you use that budget. It is clear to me that this President, President Bush, his priority is for the people that funded his campaign. It is not a matter of whether we should fund weapons or supplies that our troops need or whether we should take care of the veterans who have taken care of us for so many years and who need us in their twilight. It is these tax cuts that this administration wants to make permanent. That is the problem. It is a matter of priorities.

I mentioned earlier today that Valentine's Day is coming up. Everybody wants to show you some love. If you love me, you are going to send me flowers or spend some money on me, you are going to take me out to dinner. But it is clear that the Bush administration does not love these veterans. In other words, they talk a great talk, but they do not walk the walk or they do not roll the roll. If you look at their budget, the budget priorities are to their rich friends that funded their campaign coffers, and not to the veterans that need them.

I come from a district where the veterans are not the richest in the country. In fact, one-third of the homeless people are veterans that have fallen through the safety net. They are not getting the health care they need or the mental health counseling or the job opportunities. It is a failure. The richest country in the world, and we are trying to put the burdens of the war on the veterans. Help me, somebody.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, reclaiming my time, talking about priorities, I will just share this bit of information. When one discounts the additional moneys that the VA will get from imposing user fees and increased copayments for prescription drugs on our veterans, we find that the increase in the VA budget is four-tenths of one percent, four-tenths of one percent.

Now, I think it is interesting to know that the American Legion and other veterans groups have requested \$3.5 billion as an increase in health care spending for VA health care for fiscal year 2006. They have requested an additional \$3.5 billion. The President is proposing a \$9.5 billion foreign aid bill,

foreign aid bill, which is an increase of \$2.1 billion.

Now, I am not saying that all foreign aid is wrong or bad or should not take place, but I am troubled when we are taking American tax dollars and we are increasing significantly the amount of our foreign aid by \$2.1 billion, and we are only increasing the budget for VA health care by four-tenths of one percent.

Mr. Speaker, I shared the press release from the Disabled American Veterans. I would like to share some information from the Paralyzed Veterans of America. The Paralyzed Veterans of America was founded in 1946. It is the only Congressionally chartered veterans organization which is dedicated solely for the benefit of individuals with spinal cord injuries or disease.

Here is what the Paralyzed Veterans of America had to say about President Bush's budget: "Paralyzed Veterans of America calls the administration's budget proposal woefully inadequate, forcing some veterans to pay for the health care of others by increasing fees and copayments."

Then I will read from the press release. It says, "The release of the fiscal year 2006 budget request by the administration demonstrates a callous disregard for the services of America's veterans and represents another attempt to place the burden of needed funding increases on the backs of disabled and sick veterans. 'I do not understand where their priorities are,' said Andy Pleva, the National President of the Paralyzed Veterans of America. He says, 'at a time when more and more service members are returning from Iraq and Afghanistan in need of health care and when aging veterans of previous wars are turning to the VA for their medical needs, the administration proposes a basically flat budget, with the only increases coming out of the veterans' pockets. This is not acceptable.'"

Mr. Speaker, the Paralyzed Veterans of America speculate that if the President's budget is enacted, if higher prescription drug costs are included and if enrollment fees are demanded, the result will be to drive veterans out of the system. In fact, the Veterans Administration itself estimates that as a result of the increased fees, 213,000 veterans will leave the health care system next year.

I want to tell you, many of these veterans are of limited income, they are sick, they are in need of medical care and they may not be able to get it elsewhere. Yet this Nation, this administration, this Congress, if this budget is enacted, will be responsible for turning these veterans away, and the American people I think do not want that to happen.

As I said earlier, I truly believe that the American people want this Nation to care for its veterans.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. If the gentleman will yield further, I am reminded of the words of the first

President of the United States, George Washington, whose words are worth repeating at this time. "The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportioned as to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars are treated and appreciated by their country."

Now, I think that is very profound. In other words, how we treat our veterans today will determine whether our young people will enlist and commit themselves to go to war to fight for our great country. Profound, does the gentleman not think?

Mr. STRICKLAND. Well, I think it is. That may explain why there seem to be some problems developing with the enrollments. I think people are watching what this government is doing, and as they feel like promises are not being kept, I think they have just reason for questioning whether or not this Nation would really value and prize their service to the country.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. If the gentleman will yield further, for the last 4 years, every year we have had to go through this dance, and predominantly the Democrats have had to fight to increase these budgets. But this year, I guess after the election and after the President and his party have flim-flammed the American people, the gloves are off. They do not care.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Reclaiming my time, I do think this year is different than in past years, because in past years, this House is controlled by Republicans. That means every committee has a Republican as the Chair of that committee.

For the last 4 years, the veterans of this country have had a friend in the chair's position, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH).

The gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) was a member of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs for 24 years. For almost a quarter of a century this man served on the Committee on Veterans' Affairs. He had served as the chair of the committee for the last 4 years.

Quite frankly, when the President tried in the past to impose a user fee of \$250 a year and when he tried to increase the cost of a prescription drug from \$7 to \$15, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) as the Republican chairman was effective in keeping those increases from being enacted.

Well, what did they do to the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH)? At the beginning of this Congress the Republican leadership in this House called the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) in, according to newspaper reports, and they basically stripped him of his position as the Chair of the Committee on Veterans' Affairs. But not only that, they took him off the entire committee, a committee he served on for 24 years.

I wonder, where were the friends of the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) in this Chamber? I say to my

friend from Florida, if the Democratic leadership were to treat you like that, I would stand up and say, "This will not happen."

Where were the friends of the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH)? The gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH), in my judgment, is the leading pro-life representative in this entire Chamber. He is a man of impeccable credentials. He is a humanitarian. He has been concerned about the violation of human rights not just here at home, but around the world.

□ 2115

He is a conservative, a conservative, a member of the Republican Party. But because he had the gall, because he had the courage to stand up and be an advocate for veterans, the leadership in the Republican Party stripped him of his chair position and removed him from the committee.

Now, I want to tell my colleagues, this was not an accident; this was planned. And as word was starting to spread that this was going to be done to the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH), 10 national veterans organizations in this country got together and they wrote a letter to the gentleman from Illinois (Speaker HASTERT) urging him to protect the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) from being treated in this way.

I will share with my colleagues what those 10 organizations were: the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Military Order of the Purple Heart, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, the Vietnam Veterans of America, the Disabled American Veterans, AMVETS, the Blinded Veterans Association, the Jewish War Veterans, and the Noncommissioned Officers.

And they wrote Speaker HASTERT and they said, "On behalf of the Nation's leading veterans organizations representing over 5 million members, we write to urge that Congressman CHRIS SMITH remain chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs." They went on to say, "Over the past 4 years, Chairman SMITH's national reputation as the foremost congressional expert and advocate on veterans issues has continued to grow. All of our organizations have recognized his extraordinary public service and accomplishments through our own prestigious awards."

And then they said, "In our view," and this is coming from these 10 national veterans organizations, they said, "In our view, it would be a tragedy if CHRIS SMITH left the chairmanship. The unnecessary loss of his leadership, knowledge, skill, honesty, passion, and work ethic would be a deeply disturbing development, not just to us, but to the millions of veterans across the country whose lives he has touched."

And did Speaker HASTERT listen to these veterans organizations? Absolutely not. It did not matter. He was an advocate for veterans. He wanted to adequately fund VA health care. Well,

with this administration and with this Republican leadership, it was just not acceptable.

Now, people may be listening and they may be thinking, there goes TED STRICKLAND again. He is that Democrat, he is trying to beat up on the Republicans. Listen, I want to say to my colleagues that if my Democratic leadership was doing this, I would be as upset as I am with the Republican leadership. And these 10 veterans organizations, they are not partisan groups. These groups exist for the sole purpose of standing up for veterans and veterans needs.

So we are trying to let people know this can be stopped. This budget has not yet been enacted; it has not been approved. And it is my hope that people across this country, when they hear what was done to CHRIS SMITH and when they hear what these veterans organizations say about this budget, will call the White House, will call their representatives, will get in touch with their Senators and say, this has got to stop. You cannot balance this budget or even try to cut the deficit, because there is no attempt to balance the budget, obviously; but you cannot cut this deficit on the backs of America's veterans. I yield to my friend.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, the sad thing is that the gentleman is talking about the people's House; and the people's House, under this administration, more so than even when the Republicans took over, but under this administration has been run like a dictatorship. It is very, very sad, and I am glad that the gentleman from Ohio pointed out what it is that veterans can do. I know the organizations are talking to their members because they are talking to me. But they need to contact their Member of Congress and let them know, as Senator and former Governor Chiles used to say, "This dog won't hunt."

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I want to share another saying with my colleague that came from Benjamin Franklin. Benjamin Franklin said, "If you act like sheep, the wolves will eat you."

Now, I say to my Republican colleagues, if your leadership could do this to CHRIS SMITH, they can do it to you. Now, you were elected, we were all elected by over 635,000 or so constituents. Our obligation is to come up here and be the representative of the people who elected us. We are not up here to please the Democratic leadership or the Republican leadership or even to please the President; we are up here to represent our people.

But I want to say this: if you become so cowed, if you become so afraid, if you become so sheep-like that you are afraid to speak out, for example, as the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) spoke out in defense of veterans health care, if you are so afraid that they are going to take away your chairmanship or they are somehow going to punish you politically, then

you cannot really be an independent spokesperson for your people.

I want to tell my colleague, I would urge my colleagues, I would urge the friends of the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) here in this Chamber and around this country to have the courage to speak up and speak out and say, what was done to CHRIS SMITH is wrong. He is a good man, a good person. The only thing he did, the only thing he did was to stand up for veterans.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I think this is bigger than CHRIS SMITH in that it is the House of Representatives that we can change in 2 years; we can change the direction of this country. And it goes back to elections, I have to say it. I mean, what happens in an election controls everything we do, from the time you are born to the time you die and everything in-between.

This veterans budget, I have to say if it had been Senator KERRY, we never would have received a budget like this, or if it had been any of the Democratic candidates and, really, if it had been any of the other Republican candidates. This administration is totally insensitive to the needs of the veterans and the people. They talk a great talk, but they do not walk the walk. They only care about the 1 percent of the people that contribute to their campaign, and if you are not writing checks to the Republican campaign, then just forget it.

But the veterans can turn this around. I know that they can mobilize. I know what they can do; I have seen it happen in Florida. Once before they cut major health care assistance in Florida, and the veterans and organizations and groups got together. They called their Congress people and, let me tell my colleague, not only did they put the money back; they do not even know how it got out. So I know they can do it.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I made reference earlier this evening to a press release from the Disabled American Veterans and the Paralyzed Veterans of America. There was also a press release put out by the American Legion. The national commander, Mr. THOMAS Cadmus, made a good point in his press release. He said, "Veterans' health care is an ongoing expense of war." In other words, VA health care is not welfare.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. No.

Mr. STRICKLAND. VA health care is something that veterans have earned through their service to this country.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, it is a contract. It is a contract. When those young men and women in their prime go and fight for us and serve for us, we owe them. They should not be fighting for the guarantee that we promised them, basic health care, and yet, these copayments and these fees, they cannot afford it. They live on a fixed income.

Mr. STRICKLAND. That is right.

Mr. Speaker, concluding the press release that was put out by the American Legion, the national commander said this, and I am quoting: "No active duty service member in harm's way should ever have to question the Nation's commitment to veterans. This is the wrong message at the wrong time to the wrong constituency." And I would just repeat again, we have lost well over 1,440 lives in Iraq.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. But, sir, if the gentleman will yield, how many have been wounded? How many have been disabled? They are going to come back, and then they are not in the military system, they are in the VA system. How will the VA system handle them when they are proposing to cut out thousands of nurses?

Now, I know the gentleman has the same problem that I have when they come to us about how long they have to wait in order to get assistance, and we have to intervene. For basic assistance, they are put on a waiting list, and they wait for weeks and months. Yet we are going to have all of these veterans, thousands coming back.

The gentleman mentioned the number that have been killed, but what about those who have been wounded, coming into a system that we are cutting to the bone. It is a failure. There is a Constitution and there is a separation of power. We have a duty as Members of the Congress, of the people's House, to deal with this budget.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, much of what we heard all day here in the Chamber and we heard from the Special Orders that preceded us was these are tight budgetary times. Well, they are tight budgetary times because of certain things.

Now, part of the reason they are tight budgetary times is that we have taken our national resources and we have given them to the richest people in America in the form of tax breaks, people who really are doing quite well already. Is it not ironic that at a time of war, we would give tax breaks to rich, comfortable, wealthy people at the very upper end of the income spectrum and, at the same time, the President, and this is the President of the United States, the man who stood right up there a few days ago and gave the State of the Union address, the Commander in Chief, the man who made the decision to send these soldiers into war; that he would send us a budget and in that budget he would ask that the cost of a prescription drug for a veteran be increased, be increased from \$7 to \$15; and he would ask that these veterans have to pay a \$250 annual copayment.

Let me say this, and then I will yield to my friend. The American people need to know this, and many of them do. But we get paid pretty well here in the Chamber. I do not know, I truthfully do not know the exact dollar amount of our salaries, but it is over \$150,000 that a Member of the House of

Representatives makes. I think that is a pretty good income. I think the gentlewoman and I and other Members of this Chamber ought to be able to go out and buy our prescription medications or we could pay an increased copay, but many of the veterans that I represent are fairly poor. In fact, most, most of the people in my district are struggling economically. But these veterans, many take 10 or 12 or 15, some that many prescriptions a month, and to take and increase the cost from \$7 to \$15 a prescription, if they have 10 prescriptions, that is a lot of money.

Some of these veterans may make as little as \$22,000 and be considered, as some of the newspapers refer to them, as higher income. Well, I think \$150,000 that we make is higher income; I do not think \$22,000 is higher income.

But here we had a President, and I keep going back to the President because, quite frankly, he is, he is the Commander in Chief. He is the one that crafts the budget. He sends the budget over here to the Congress. The budget originates at the White House. It is his budget. So he sends us a budget, and in that budget they very specifically say, veterans ought to pay more for their medicine; veterans ought to pay a user fee; we are going to have less money for veterans nursing home care; we are going to have fewer nurses and other health care professionals working in our VA hospitals; we are going to have to close some hospitals; and, by the way, we are not going to keep the promise to provide the kind of resources that were necessary to construct new and better facilities for our veterans.

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These are the facts. These are the facts.

I would invite any of my colleagues, Republican or Democrat, to come down here to the Chamber and join us tonight and dispute these facts. These are the facts, and they need to be exposed, because once the American people find out what is happening to America's veterans, I believe they are going to be outraged. And I think they are going to say, this cannot happen.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I just want to thank the gentleman again for having this special order tonight and pointing out what the veterans can do to turn this around.

We in this House cannot do it. We can point it out. We can have town hall meetings in the districts. We will do that. We can talk to the groups and organizations. But I do know that the veterans have the power to influence this body and the other body and the White House. If nothing else, they can put a circle around that White House and let them know that Humpty Dumpty must fall.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, one of the things that I say to veterans frequently is that all politicians like to be associated with veterans. You look at

political brochures, you see political commercials and you see the President standing on a platform with flags on the ground and veterans standing around him.

I will admit, I like to be with veterans too, and I like to have veterans support me. But the fact is I think all the veterans, one of the ways they can fight back is they can say, you know, we will not get our picture made with any politician who does not support us. No more pictures, no more being on a platform. If the Representative or the Senator or the President does not support me, then I will not allow myself to be used in a picture or in a political brochure or in a political commercial to support that man or woman.

I think it is time that veterans start playing hard ball with us, because the fact is that we do respond to the feedback that we get from our constituents. I am just absolutely convinced, I would say to my friend from Florida, I am absolutely convinced that if we were to take a poll of the American people and we were to ask them if they felt that this country had an obligation to care for those who have fought our wars and defended our freedoms, the American people would say, Absolutely, and we support whatever it takes to make sure they get the kind of health care they need.

So I believe the American people are on the side of the veterans. And the administration may not be, the leaders of this House may not be, but the American people are exactly where they should be on this issue.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. Mr. Speaker, I would say that if we did a poll, one of those CNN polls or one of those polls that we do every day, and ask, Do you want the 1 percent tax cut done away with to completely fund the veterans program, I bet we would get 75 or 80 percent saying, Let us fund the veteran program. Without a doubt, the American people want to pay their debt, and we owe these veterans.

It is not welfare. It is paying for people that have stood up for you in their prime, and now they need us. And what are we doing? We are giving tax breaks to people that contribute to our campaign. And that really bothers me because when you talk to the veterans, you know that they are vulnerable, they are sick, and they need the assistance.

Many of the people that you pass right here in D.C. on the street, homeless, are veterans that the system has failed. One-third of the homeless people are veterans.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I just want to say in closing that I think what we are talking about here is a moral issue. We hear a lot of talk from politicians these days about moral behavior and immoral behavior. And quite frankly, I think that the way we treat the most vulnerable among us says something about our character. I think whether or not we keep the promises, the promises that have been

made to our children, to our older people, to our veterans says something about our character.

So I think what we are talking about here is more than just a political disagreement or a matter of judgment. I think it says something about the kind of people we are; and I would hope that those who are responsible for this terrible budget would reflect upon this.

Mr. Speaker, in closing I would just like to say I am so happy that our good ranking member, the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) is here. The gentleman has been on the committee for much longer than I have, so he has the benefit of having the historical point of view, knowing from whence we have come. We appreciate his leadership.

I would just like to say to my friend from Florida, I want to thank you for taking the time to be here tonight and for assisting in this special order.

I was wondering if the gentlewoman has something to say in conclusion.

Ms. CORRINE BROWN of Florida. In conclusion, our work is cut out for us. We know what we have to do to educate the American people, to turn this horrible proposal for these veterans around.

I think one of the scriptures that I particularly like is, To whom God has given much, much is expected.

God has been good to America. It is important that America is good to the people that have stood up for us throughout the years.

This budget is unacceptable. I remember talking once to the veterans groups and I said, this administration, the Bush administration, talks a great talk, but they do not walk the walk. And this was the Paralyzed Veterans and they said, They do not roll the roll either. And that is truth.

But the key is, we together, Democrats and Republicans, and particularly the veterans' organizations can turn this around. We really need a dedicated source of funding. We should not have to deal with this every single year.

Mr. Speaker, the following is an article entitled "Veterans Angered By Official's Comments."

[From the Tribune-Herald, Feb. 7, 2005]

VETERANS ANGERED BY OFFICIAL'S COMMENTS
(By Richard L. Smith)

Let me see if I have this straight. We need to squeeze just a little more sacrifice out of our military veterans. Is that it?

That seems to be the implicit message of David Chu. He is an economist who spent the better part of the past quarter-century as a federal bureaucrat. He now directs the Pentagon human resource shop as under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness. Chu managed to outrage some veterans with his comments in a Jan. 25, 2005, interview with the Wall Street Journal.

If you believe Chu, money going for military retirement and veterans benefits would be better spent on weapons. He called the amounts of money expended on veterans "hurtful" to the national defense in the Journal article.

I sent a list of questions I had about Chu's remarks by e-mail to the Pentagon. I was told my questions could not be answered by my deadline. So I extended my deadline. I

am still waiting to hear from the Defense Department.

Aggressive lobbying by veterans groups that brought about medical care for retired military helped bring about this great drain on fighting wars, Chu said in the article. He described it as "painful" to move money for new weapons programs to accounts that fund Tricare, the managed health care system for military personnel and retired service members over the age of 65. And, of course, the Pentagon official said proposals to reduce the reservist retirement age from 60 to 55 would also not be a good idea.

Chu's remarks did not go over well with everyone, if you can imagine that.

Bob Clements, a retired Air Force brigadier general from Carmichael, Calif., said he has a large e-mail network made up of hundreds of veterans. Clements sent out a message recently in which, in his words, he "decided to cut loose" on Chu. The retired fighter pilot and medic pointed out in an e-mail missive he launched that Chu knew that military retirees had until recently been slow to band together to protect their benefits. He urged veterans to continue to stand up and fight for their rights. Clements said he also has been around the block enough to know that such a high-level official "is not spouting off" on his own.

"I don't see how these remarks could be made by a subordinate without the secretary of defense's and the president's approval," Clements told me during a phone interview.

U.S. Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Waco, said he believes Chu was running an idea up the flagpole to see whether it gets saluted or picked off. Edwards prefers the latter.

"I hope that Secretary Chu doesn't reflect the administration's position," Edwards told me by phone from Washington. "But if he does, that trial balloon should be shot down by howitzers."

Edwards, who represented the Army's massive Fort Hood base until Texas Republicans redrew congressional districts in 2003, went to the House floor after the Journal article hit the streets and denounced Chu's remarks.

"The fact is that we are spending too little, not too much on our veterans and military retirees," the congressman told colleagues. "The truth is that last year's budget for veterans health care did not even keep up with inflation. So, in effect, we had a real cut in veterans health care spending during a time of war. What happened to the principle of shared sacrifice during a time of war?"

Edwards said Chu's remarks were a slap in the face for veterans.

"I find Secretary Chu's statement to be offensive and outrageous," Edwards told me. "It's offensive to every serviceman and woman who has ever put on the uniform and has been willing to risk their life for their country."

Veterans organizations were also quick to condemn the statement made by Chu. A statement by the American Legion said that the government's care for its veterans was part of a moral contract that should not be broken. The Military Officers Association of America, which the Journal article called the main force behind retiree benefits, labeled Chu's assertions as "baloney."

If Chu is the Bush administration's canary in the coal mine of public opinion, then perhaps we are getting a glimpse of where veterans benefits are headed. Take retirement pay for example. Chu said in the article that the 19-year-old enlistee doesn't care about annuities. Young GI Joe or Jane would rather have the cash to buy a "pickup truck," the Defense Department official told the Journal.

Edwards calls such a contention insulting to the young men and women who risk their

lives to serve. Benefits, he said, are part of what helps the military attract and keep the high-caliber service members in its employ.

Of course, these benefits come from all of the taxpayers out there and not just veterans. But there does seem to be a high level of public support for those who are fighting our wars. Do you think those with ribbons magnets on their cars will begrudge health care to those troops who return home? It would seem hard to imagine. Why, some people probably wouldn't mind throwing in a pickup truck in as part of the package.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I thank my friend.

In closing, I just say this. We have said a lot of things tonight. Some of those hearing what we said may object to what we have said. I would invite any Member of this Chamber, Republican or Democrat, to join us some time next week and we can debate these issues. If my Republican friends think that I am being unfair in what I am saying, I would welcome them to come to this Chamber next week so we can talk back and forth, because these are serious matters and I do not want to be unfair to anyone.

But I tell you, I do not want the President to get by with this budget without its being exposed. I do not want the leaders of this House to get by and say, these are tough budgetary times and everybody has got to take a hit. The veterans have already taken a hit. They have fought our wars. I do not think they should have to fight for the health care they need.

Ms. HERSETH. Mr. Speaker, as a member of the Veterans' Affairs Committee—and on behalf of thousands of veterans in South Dakota—I rise this evening with serious concerns about what the President's budget means for our nation's veterans.

As Congressman STRICKLAND and other of my colleagues have expressed, fulfilling the government's obligations to our veterans is a moral issue that reflects our national character. At a time in our nation's history when we are asking young men and women for tremendous service and sacrifice, we must send a clear message to them and their families that veterans' health care is considered an ongoing cost of national security during times of both war and peace. That consideration should be reflected in the President's budget, but it is not. With a new generation of veterans coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan, now is the time we should be proving that a promise made is a promise kept. At a time of tight budgets, it all comes down to priorities, and the needs of our country's veterans should be at the top of the priority list, not at the bottom.

I am concerned about what the President's budget means for the men and women who have fought to protect our individual and collective freedoms and what the budget means for the dedicated doctors, nurses and other personnel in VA medical centers and clinics across the country who strive to provide quality health care to our veterans. The plans to assess annual enrollment fees for certain veterans who desire to access care from the VA and to increase co-pays for veterans' prescription medications are unacceptable.

Our veterans deserve better than this budget, and that is why I am proud to be an original cosponsor of Ranking Member LANE

EVANS' Assured Funding bill. We should take veterans' health care funding out of annual budget fights as a top priority for our nation.

This weekend, as I return to South Dakota, it will be my honor to take part in a homecoming ceremony for the 147th Artillery unit from the northeast part of the state. As I meet these brave men and women, I will thank them for their service and exchange handshakes and hugs with them and their family members. Every member of Congress should be able to tell the troops when they return, with certainty, that our government will live up to its obligations in recognition of their service to the country. It is the right thing to do. And we will continue to fight for those who have served.

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

By unanimous consent, leave of absence was granted to:

Mr. NEUGEBAUER (at the request of Mr. DELAY) for February 8 on account of travel delays.

SPECIAL ORDERS GRANTED

By unanimous consent, permission to address the House, following the legislative program and any special orders heretofore entered, was granted to:

The following Members (at the request of Ms. WOOLSEY) to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material:

Mr. BROWN of Ohio, for 5 minutes, today.

Ms. WOOLSEY, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. DEFAZIO, for 5 minutes, today.

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. DAVIS of Illinois, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. PALLONE, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. CUMMINGS, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. GENE GREEN of Texas, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. GEORGE MILLER of California, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. SANDERS, for 5 minutes, today.

Ms. HERSETH, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. SCOTT of Georgia, for 5 minutes, today.

Ms. WATSON, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. CUELLAR, for 5 minutes, today.

The following Members (at the request of Mr. GINGREY) to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material:

Mr. GINGREY, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. FITZPATRICK of Pennsylvania, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. HYDE, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. BOEHNER, for 5 minutes, today.

(The following Members (at their own request) to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material:)

Mr. KINGSTON, for 5 minutes, today.

Mr. OWENS, for 5 minutes, today.

ADJOURNMENT

Mr. STRICKLAND. Mr. Speaker, I move that the House do now adjourn.

The motion was agreed to; accordingly (at 9 o'clock and 38 minutes p.m.), the House adjourned until to-

morrow, Thursday, February 10, 2005, at 10 a.m.

EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATIONS, ETC.

Under clause 8 of rule XII, executive communications were taken from the Speaker's table and referred as follows:

664. A letter from the Executive Director, Commodity Futures Trading Commission, transmitting the Commission's final rule—Reporting Levels and Recordkeeping (RIN: 3038-AC08) received January 24, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Agriculture.

665. A letter from the Congressional Review Coordinator, APHIS, Department of Agriculture, transmitting the Department's final rule—Asian Longhorned Beetle; Addition to Quarantined Areas [Docket No. 04-130-1] received January 31, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Agriculture.

666. A letter from the Administrator, Rural Housing Service, Department of Agriculture, transmitting the Department's final rule—Surety Requirements (RIN: 0575-AC60) received January 7, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Agriculture.

667. A letter from the Congressional Review Coordinator, Department of Agriculture, transmitting the Department's final rule—Importation of Clementines, Mandarins, and Tangerines From Chile [Docket No. 02-081-3] (RIN: 0579-AB77) received December 15, 2004, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Agriculture.

668. A letter from the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness, Department of Defense, transmitting approval of Colonel Michael J. Lally III, whose name appears on an enclosed list, to wear the insignia of brigadier general in accordance with title 10, United States Code, section 777; to the Committee on Armed Services.

669. A letter from the General Counsel/FEMA, Department of Homeland Security, transmitting the Department's final rule—Changes in Flood Elevation Determination [Docket No. FEMA-D-7565] received January 24, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Financial Services.

670. A letter from the General Counsel/FEMA, Department of Homeland Security, transmitting the Department's final rule—Suspension of Community Eligibility [Docket No. FEMA-7859] received January 24, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Financial Services.

671. A letter from the General Counsel/FEMA, Department of Homeland Security, transmitting the Department's final rule—Final Flood Elevation Determinations—received January 24, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Financial Services.

672. A letter from the General Counsel/FEMA, Department of Homeland Security, transmitting the Department's final rule—List of Communities Eligible for the Sale of Flood Insurance [Docket No. FEMA-7774] received January 24, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Financial Services.

673. A letter from the Assistant General Counsel for Regulatory Services, Office of Innovation and Improvement, Department of Education, transmitting the Department's final rule—Scientifically Based Evaluation Methods (RIN: 1890-ZA00) received February 4, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Education and the Workforce.

674. A letter from the Director, Regulations Policy and Management Staff, FDA, Department of Health and Human Services, transmitting the Department's final rule—Gastroenterology-Urology Devices; Classification for External Penile Rigidity Devices [Docket No. 1998N-1111] received January 14, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Energy and Commerce.

675. A letter from the Director, Regulations Policy and Management Staff, FDA, Department of Health and Human Services, transmitting the Department's final rule—Medical Devices; Obstetrical and Gynecological Devices; Classification of the Assisted Reproduction Laser System [Docket No. 2004N-0530] received January 14, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Energy and Commerce.

676. A letter from the Director, Regulations Policy and Management Staff, FDA, Department of Health and Human Services, transmitting the Department's final rule—Cardiovascular and Neurological Devices; Reclassification of Two Embolization Devices [Docket No. 2003N-0567] received January 14, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Energy and Commerce.

677. A letter from the Director, Regulations Policy and Management Staff, FDA, Department of Health and Human Services, transmitting the Department's final rule—Biological Products; Bacterial Vaccines and Toxoids; Implementation of Efficacy Review; Withdrawal [Docket No. 1980N-0208] received January 14, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Energy and Commerce.

678. A letter from the Director, Office of Congressional Affairs, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, transmitting the Commission's final rule—Emergency Planning and Preparedness For Production And Utilization Facilities (RIN: 3150-AH00) received January 25, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on Energy and Commerce.

679. A letter from the Assistant Legal Adviser for Treaty Affairs, Department of State, transmitting copies of international agreements, other than treaties, entered into by the United States, pursuant to 1 U.S.C. 112(b); to the Committee on International Relations.

680. A letter from the Assistant Legal Adviser for Treaty Affairs, Department of State, transmitting pursuant to the Taiwan Relations Act, agreements concluded between January 1 and December 31, 2004, pursuant to 22 U.S.C. 3301, et. seq; to the Committee on International Relations.

681. A letter from the Acting Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs, Department of State, transmitting the Department's final rule—Schedule of Fees for Consular Services, Department of State and Overseas Embassies and Consulates (RIN: 1400-AB94; 1400-AB95) received January 31, 2005, pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 801(a)(1)(A); to the Committee on International Relations.

682. A letter from the Acting Assistant Secretary for Legislative Affairs, Department of State, transmitting a copy of Presidential Determination No. 2005-13 pursuant to Section 1306 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2003, pursuant to Public Law 107-314, section 1306; to the Committee on International Relations.

683. A letter from the Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia, transmitting a copy of D.C. ACT 15-746, "Lot 878 Square 456 Tax Exemption Clarification Act of 2004," pursuant to D.C. Code section 1-233(c)(1); to the Committee on Government Reform.

684. A letter from the Chairman, Council of the District of Columbia, transmitting a copy of D.C. ACT 15-747, "Labor Relations and Collective Bargaining Amendment Act of 2004," pursuant to D.C. Code section 1-